

Georgian Foundation of Strategic and International Studies

Russia and Georgia: Relations are Still Tense

The article aims to reveal the gist of the most recent political relations between Russia and Georgia. Of all Russia's neighbors, the tensest relations have developed with Georgia, a small Caucasian state striving to carry out an independent policy oriented toward the West. The author shows that the relations between the two countries can best be characterized as those between a strong and a weak neighbor, a scenario well known from the classics of the international relations theory.

According to the specific laws governing international relations and the accepted game rules, each sovereign state, no matter how small and weak, should primarily consider its own interests. Due to the new circumstances, particularly its incorporation into the international political and economic system, Georgia has begun to gradually develop new ties and, naturally, distance itself from Russia.

Of all the CIS countries, it is Georgia that maintains the closest relations with the U.S. and has declared its intentions to join NATO. Georgia believes its strategic goal to be integration into the European and Euro-Atlantic structures.¹ It has many challenging domestic and foreign problems, but the most acute is perhaps its relations with Russia, which is conducting a tough policy of pressure on its little neighbor.

Georgia's relations with Russia are the most serious problem of its national security and, consequently, its foreign policy. They leave much to be desired, and their current state cannot be considered a diplomatic or foreign policy achievement for either Georgia or Russia.²

Interrelations between Georgia and Russia are developing in keeping with the provisions of the international relations theory, which, when defining the place and opportunities of small countries in the international system, notes the following, among other things:

1. It is extremely dangerous for a small country to be the neighbor of a large and powerful nation;
2. A small country should act extremely cautiously in its relations with a powerful neighbor; it does not have the right to make a strategic mistake, such mistakes can sometimes be tantamount to suicide;
3. Diplomacy is essentially the only foreign policy tool a small country can possess.

It is no secret that Russian policy is striving to return Georgia to the Russian orbit and establish a pro-Russian leadership in this country. It is prepared to go to any lengths to achieve its goals. At present, and in the near future, Russia does not and will not have enough resources or desire to play a constructive role with respect to Georgia, that is, help it "to get back on its feet" and build a contemporary stable democratic state with a new economy. Russia has too many serious economic, demographic, and sociopolitical problems of its own. The Northern Caucasus is a good case in point.

Russia is objectively interested in the long run of having stable states with well developing economies among its neighbors in the Southern Caucasus, providing favorable conditions for Russian business, particularly since geographical and historical circumstances are conducive to establishing constructive, good neighborly, and friendly relations. Despite all their resentments against Russia, politicians, and the Georgian people as a whole, understand the value of positive relations with Russia, hoping to have it as a strong, healthy, and rich neighbor. Otherwise, there will be no order at all in the Eurasian space.

It is not in Georgia's interests to spoil its relations with its northern neighbor. The economic advantages of friendship with Russia and the established cultural and kindred ties between the people of both countries aside, a political confrontation with the Russian Federation is fraught with serious, if not fatal, consequences for Georgia, which Russia has repeatedly given its small and weak neighbor to understand. This seeming imprudence on Georgia's part casts aspersions on the ability of its political leadership to adequately assess the situation and make realistic decisions. This is precisely what the Russian military-political elite is accusing the Georgian leadership of, while continuing to put pressure on its weak neighbor. But is the Georgian leadership, which is allegedly striving to hinder Russia in every way and not taking into account the vital interests of its powerful neighbor, really so imprudent?

Georgia's foreign political orientation is determined by its strategic goal to integrate into the Euro-Atlantic and European structures. This goal logically ensues from the fact that since Georgia is a multiethnic and polyconfessional state, democracy is vital to it for balancing the interests among the diverse groups of its population. Georgia will be unable to survive if it does not become a truly democratic state.

In its efforts to return Georgia to its fold, Russia has been unable to offer its weak neighbor any kind of attractive model. On the contrary, it tried and is still trying to put pressure on Georgia, primarily by taking advantage of its internal weakness, which ensues from its ethnic and confessional diversity. With its authoritarian inclinations, Russia could and would not want to help Georgia become a democratic state. Keeping in mind the current political processes in the Russian Federation (particularly the situation in the Northern Caucasus), becoming a Russian satellite would mean that Georgia would lose its historical opportunity to build a contemporary democratic nation and state, that is, it would lose its national perspective. This, and not its disdain for Russia, explains why the Georgian political elite is striving to make the country part of the Euro-Atlantic community.

Russia's Interests

It goes without saying that the Caucasus is extremely important to Russia, which is confirmed by the centuries-long attempts by the Russian Empire to penetrate the Caucasus and Russia's (first imperial and then Soviet) almost two-century-long activity in this strategically important region. The collapse of the U.S.S.R. and emergence in the Southern Caucasus of three independent states (Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia) is forcing Russia to adapt to the rapidly changing geopolitical situation. Used to applying and demonstrating its might, the Russian Federation is trying to reanimate its status as a great power, primarily by restoring control over the former Soviet republics. It is the Russian military-political elite's objective to remain

in the Southern Caucasus, and it cannot imagine achieving this without turning Georgia into its satellite.

Georgia is a key country for Russian politicians. And keeping in mind the current situation in Azerbaijan and Armenia, if Russia does not retain its control over Georgia, not only will it be unable to restore control over the Southern Caucasus, but it will also be unable to claim a role as a major player in the region.³ Control over Georgia will allow Russia not only to control the entire Southern Caucasus, but also to feel confident in the Northern Caucasus, where things are not going as the Russian leadership would like.

Control over Georgia will allow Russia to have an obstacle in the south that can hold back Turkey's influence on the former Soviet Turkic-speaking republics and peoples. Control over Georgia will make it possible to cut off energy resource-rich Azerbaijan from the West by closing its access through Georgia to the Black Sea. Control over Georgia will allow Russia to interfere in the creation of a Europe-Asia corridor and transit routes between Central Asia and Europe via the Southern Caucasus, as well as retain its monopoly in transporting energy resources and other commodities from Central and Eastern Asia to Europe. Control over Georgia will allow Russia to retain its major military presence in the Black Sea. By controlling Georgia and, consequently, the entire Southern Caucasus, Russia can ensure its significant influence on the Middle East countries. What is more, control over Georgia will provide Russia with convenient contact with its only ally in the Caucasus—Armenia—which due to historical circumstances is wary of Turkey and hostile toward Azerbaijan, occupying almost 1/5 of the latter's territory.

These reasons, for which Russian politicians believe that Georgia should be kept in Russia's military-political orbit, are the powerful factor compelling the Russian Federation to constantly put pressure on Georgia and accuse it of conducting an anti-Russian policy.

Tense Relations

Immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it became clear that Russia did not want to leave the Southern Caucasus. This was confirmed primarily by the actions of the Russian military in this region and in particular their "contribution" to destabilization in the Southern Caucasus by supporting separatism in the region's countries and fomenting ethnopolitical conflicts.⁴ The Russian Federation has always viewed the Caucasus as an exclusively vital strategic region, retention of control over which is perceived as a vitally important priority of Russia's national security.⁵

As a strategically key country for the Russian Federation, Georgia was placed under significant pressure of the latter, which increased even more after 1999 when Vladimir Putin came to power in Russia. Independence proved to be an extremely arduous test for the small post-Soviet state. Georgia must not only resolve very difficult problems relating to building its statehood and a new economy, but also has to bear the immense pressure exerted on it by its powerful neighbor Russia, which is willing to go to any lengths to remain in Georgia.

Small countries have a particularly hard time if they border on much stronger states.⁶ In Georgia's case, its neighbor is Russia, its former "landlord" (during the Russian Empire and then the Soviet Union) and a former superpower, which is still hoping to regain this status and is trying to retain its supremacy or at least influence in its former dominions—its newly independent neighbors.

The asymmetry of the post-Soviet space in the security sphere is making it possible for Russia to put pressure on its much weaker small neighbors. It is no coincidence that Russia's closest entourage was defined at the beginning of the 1990s as the Near Abroad, where Russia wanted to play a special role and enjoy special rights. When speaking about the countries of the Near Abroad, the then chairman of the State Duma Committee on CIS Affairs and Relations with Compatriots Konstantin Zatulin said: "With all due respect for these states, many of them are doomed to become our satellites or die. I see their territorial integrity in precisely these terms."⁷

Admittedly, since then much has changed in international politics, in Russia itself, and in the region, but Russia has not taken any constructive steps so far in its relations with the Southern Caucasus, particularly with Georgia. However, Russia is not slackening its pressure on Georgia, which confirms the immutability of Russia's strategic interests toward Georgia.

Since 1999, after the beginning of the second Chechen war, Russian-Georgian relations have become even more unfriendly. Sometimes they improve slightly, but on the whole they remain extremely unsociable, if not downright inhospitable. Many Russian analysts and parliamentary deputies define Georgia as "the only country in the world with the audacity to conduct an anti-Russian policy."⁸ In the Russian mass media, Georgia always figures as a state unfriendly toward the Russian Federation, headed by people who hate Russia (first Eduard Shevardnadze, and now Mikhail Saakashvili), and used by the United States in its intrigues against Russia, while the latter is only striving to protect its own legal interests. If we compare Russia's relations with various post-Soviet states, we can see that its relations with Georgia are the worst. To be more precise, Russia permitted and still permits itself to carry out actions with respect to Georgia that it does not permit itself to carry out with respect to other post-Soviet states or neighboring countries.

Many analysts note that the beginning of Georgia's independence was not only very painful and dramatic, but its relations with Russia were also the most antagonistic and tense.⁹ The post-Soviet chaos and anarchy in the Southern Caucasus and particularly in Georgia were not conducive either to developing the economy or to conducting a rational domestic and foreign policy. Post-Soviet Georgia did not have a mature political elite from the very beginning (where was it to get it from?) capable of restraining the genie of ethnic nationalism released by the collapse of the Soviet Union, which embroiled not only Georgia, but also the whole of the Caucasus in bloody conflicts.

The government of President Z. Gamsakhurdia was not only unable to have a constructive impact on the sociopolitical processes in Georgia, but with its clumsy policy and nationalistic rhetoric also caused an increase in the social and ethnic contradictions leading to the civil war and ethnopolitical conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Russia managed to mortify extremely weak, but obstinate Georgia after Shevardnadze, having de facto lost Abkhazia and South Ossetia, was left with no other choice but to agree under Russian pressure to join the CIS in 1993 and sign an agreement on granting Russia the use of military bases in Georgia for 25 years. At the last moment, Shevardnadze managed to include two items in the agreement on the bases obligating Russia to help Georgia restore its territorial integrity and assist in the building of Georgia's armed forces. If Russia did not fulfill these obligations, this agreement could not come into force. But the agreement was never ratified by the Georgian parliament, although the latter ratified a large so-called framework agreement between Georgia and Russia as early as 1994.

It should be stressed that the large agreement mentioned was not ratified by the Russian State Duma (President Yeltsin did not even dare suggest that the Russian parliament ratify it, being well-aware of the anti-Georgian moods of most of its members).¹⁰ Not until 2002 (!), did talks begin, at the suggestion of the Georgian side, to draw up an agreement on the fundamental principles of friendly relations between Georgia and the Russian Federation, which was supposed to create a legal base for Georgian-Russian relations.

At first, work on this agreement was quite successful, although, according to unofficial Georgian sources, the Russian side demanded from the very beginning that the Georgians include a formulation on strategic partnership between the two sides. There were also other demands, which bogged down work on the agreement,¹¹ and the foreign policy situation was not conducive to its successful continuation.¹²

This was when Russia stepped up its pressure on Georgia, accusing it of harboring Chechen militants (terrorists, in Russia's interpretation) in Georgia's Pankisi Gorge, and Russian aviation fired several times on Georgian border zones.

Moscow saw to it that the Pankisi Gorge became the central theme in Russian-Georgian relations in 2002-2003, and it even overshadowed the conflicts. In light of the campaign launched against international terrorism, this even placed Georgia in a disadvantageous position on the international arena and presented Russia practically as a victim of terrorist acts emanating from Georgia. Only timely action by the OSCE and its monitoring on the Russian-Georgian border, diplomatic moves by the U.S., and its assistance to Georgia through the Train and Equip military program averted the country from danger and made it possible for its security ministries to establish control over the Pankisi Gorge.

Relations after the Rose Revolution

Mikhail Saakashvili and his associates who came to power in Georgia in the wake of the Rose Revolution announced radical improvement of relations with Russia to be their foreign policy priority from the very beginning. Tbilisi even called on Moscow to "start relations from scratch," and a positive mood was in the offing in contacts between the two countries. But soon the new Georgian leadership was given to understand that Moscow would not tolerate Georgia's strivings to "enter Europe" and could not accept Georgia being friendly with the West and with its northern neighbor at the same time.¹³ By 2005, Russian-Georgian relations again assumed negative

tones: the Russian Federation began accusing the Georgian leadership of conducting an anti-Russian, irresponsible policy, and Tbilisi, in turn, began accusing Moscow of conducting an imperial policy.

At the beginning of 2006, when Georgia activated its policy with respect to NATO, Russia resorted to tough measures and essentially placed an embargo on the import of several Georgian agricultural products, as well as wines (the Russian market accounts for approximately 80% of the export of all Georgia's wine production). Although the Wine War with Georgia began supposedly for sanitary reasons, experts have no doubt that big politics is behind this decision by Russia, as this prohibitory measure was undertaken precisely when relations between the two countries reached their most hostile point.¹⁴

On 10 April, 2006, Russia opened up the border with Abkhazia for foreigners.¹⁵ A few weeks earlier, Gennadi Bukaev—assistant to Russian Government Chairman Mikhail Fradkov—said at a joint assembly (!) of the North and South Ossetian governments that the Russian leadership had made a fundamental decision about the annexation of South Ossetia.¹⁶ Should it be considered a constructive approach to the settlement of ethnopoltical conflicts? Russia is continuing to adhere to a policy of double standards in its relations with Georgia by respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia in words, while taking two Georgian territories—Abkhazia and South Ossetia—under its military control and assisting their separation from Georgia in practice. Russia has granted its citizenship to thousands of residents of these territories. It has also instituted visa conditions with respect to Georgia and, violating its sovereignty, introduced special privileged conditions on the Abkhazian and South Ossetian sections of the Georgian border, which is another step toward incorporating the two separatist territories of a neighboring sovereign state. Russia's official representatives, the heads of ministries and other departments, and State Duma deputies are visiting Abkhazia, while Russian organizations and private persons, despite protests from the Georgians, are privatizing Abkhazian land and property.¹⁷ Since 2003, large numbers of Abkhazians and South Ossetians have been granted Russian citizenship.

Russian expert Mikhail Alexandrov claims that Georgia is the main threat to peace and security in the region, and that it is carrying out the most destabilizing policy. "Provoking powerful geopolitical opposition, it unambiguously declared its striving to join NATO."¹⁸ He also believes that "...Russia's efforts in this respect should consist of three elements: first—deterring Georgia, second—not permitting the internationalization of the conflicts, and third—assisting political transformation within Georgia."¹⁹

Mr. Alexandrov goes even further and clearly articulates: "...this is how we would like to see revived Georgia. In my view, three main principles should be put forward in relation to Georgia: democracy, federalism, and neutrality."²⁰ Against the background of the above-mentioned, i.e., the call "to assist political transformation within Georgia," Mr. Alexandrov's opinion about what Georgian democracy should be like is especially interesting: "The development of democracy in Georgia should mean that pro-Russian politicians receive equal opportunities for carrying out their activity as those opportunities enjoyed by the party in power."²¹ A truer word was never spoken, as they say.

Is There a Solution?

The Caucasus is practically a world champion among the regions in terms of number of unrecognized territories declaring themselves to be states. The settlement of ethnopolitical conflicts in the region is still problematic, primarily due to Russia's unconstructive position. And, most important, this is making it difficult to see ways to develop full-fledged regional cooperation. The Caucasus' future is the future of the region, and not of separate countries. In this respect, we can only set our hopes on progress in the economic sphere and on the economic interests of the regional nations. It appears that business will help to resolve the problems created by the politicians and the military.

One aspect should be singled out in the relations between the two countries. Georgia is trying, without perceptible success so far, to internationalize its problems relating to separatism, while Russia is stubbornly trying, and so far successfully, to retain its essentially key role in resolving ethnopolitical conflicts. The international community is tolerating this situation for the moment, but Russia's unconstructive approach toward settling the conflicts is prolonging the crisis in the region.

Russian-Georgian relations leave much to be desired, to put it mildly. The reasons for this are Russia's loathing to lose control over Georgia and the decision of the Georgian political elite to become a member of the Euro-Atlantic community. It would seem that we are faced with two mutually exclusive viewpoints and a situation where compromise is impossible. Consequently, "the winner takes all" principle is taking the upper hand. Analyst Mikhail Alexandrov quoted above concludes that "it is essentially impossible to resolve the problems under the current Georgian leadership, political transformation within Georgia itself is needed to resolve them."²² The same Mr. Alexandrov believes that Russian-Georgian relations have gone past the point of no return, and he does not see any way of holding a constructive dialog.²³ This viewpoint does not leave any hope for improving relations and is deprived of elementary self-criticism.

Another well-known Russian analyst, Sergei Markedonov, claims when analyzing Russian-Georgian relations that "policy in the Southern Caucasus is undergoing a systemic crisis and that Moscow, perhaps for the first time in the post-Soviet period, has come up against political will and consistency in the Caucasus... Russia's Caucasian policy should finally acquire meaning and its own image and stop acting as a stepdaughter of Soviet policy."²⁴

Politics is the art of compromise, even if we are dealing with a knowingly weak side. Crude pressure does not always yield the desirable results. Georgia, as already mentioned, sees its chance of survival in creating a democratic state and integrating into the Euro-Atlantic and European structures. And in so doing, the scenario of the development of relations between Russia and Georgia could be normal, without mutual distrust and the fear of weakening their own national security. An atmosphere of mutual trust should indeed be created and policy conducted in keeping with civilized game rules. Russian-Georgian relations lack the desire to cooperate and respect each other's legal interests.

The Southern Caucasus, and particularly Georgia, is increasingly becoming a target of the world community's interest. Recently, Europe began reconsidering its energy policy, in which the Southern Caucasus and Georgia could play a more important role than before. Georgia is slowly but surely moving toward membership in NATO; its leaders are always ready to enter a dialog with Russia on the legal interests of both countries, although this dialog, to our immense regret, has become the victim of the extremely reactionary and imperial forces of its powerful northern neighbor.

Relations between Georgia and Russia are like a barometer reflecting the situation throughout the Caucasus. If Russia manages to return Georgia to its military-political orbit, this might have serious consequences for the security architecture in Europe and the Euro-Atlantic structures.

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1 For more detail, see: Georgia and the World: A Vision and Strategy for the Future, MFA of Georgia, Tbilisi, October 2000; National Security Concept of Georgia, Tbilisi, 2005.

2 For more on Russian-Georgian relations, see: J. Devdariani, "Georgia and Russia: The Troubled Road to Accommodation," in: Statehood and Security: Georgia after the Rose Revolution, ed. by B. Coppieters and R. Legvold, The MIT Press, Cambridge, 2005, pp. 153-203.

3 In this respect, it is interesting to compare the interests of the U.S. and the West in the Southern Caucasus with Russia's interests. U.S. interests in the region were formulated by Vladimir Socor in his report entitled The South Caucasus: Region of Crisis. Perspectives and Opportunities for European Policies. Paper presented at the Joint Conference of the German Society for Eastern Europe Studies and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Berlin, 30 June, 2003.

4 For more detail, see: Th. Goltz, "Letter from Eurasia: The Hidden Russian Hand," Foreign Policy, No. 92, Fall 1993, pp. 92-116; St. Blank, "Russia's Real Drive in the South," Orbis, Vol. 39, No. 3, Summer 1995, pp. 369-386; J.W.R. Lepingwell, "The Russian Military and Security Policy in the 'Near Abroad'," Survival, Vol. 36, No. 3, Autumn 1994, pp. 70-92; S.N. MacFarlane, L. Minnear, St.D. Shenfield, "Armed Conflict in Georgia: A Case Study in Humanitarian Action and Peacekeeping," Occasional Paper, No. 21, Tomas L. Watson Jr. Institute for International Studies, Brown University, Providence, 1996, pp. 15-16; St. Lunev, Russia's Dangerous Ambitions in the Caucasus, Vol. 2, No. 8, 19 April, 1996, Online version; A. Arbatov, Bezopasnost: Rossiiskiy vybor, EPI Center, Moscow, 1999, pp. 163-164.

5 See: M. Light, "Russia and Transcaucasia," in: Transcaucasia Boundaries, ed. by J.F.R. Wright, S. Goldenberg, R. Schofield, VCL.Press, London, 1996.

6 For more on the problems of security of small countries bordering on superpowers, see: O.F. Knudsen, Sharing Borders with a Great Power. An Examination of Small State Predicaments, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, Report 159, May 1992.

7 Nezavisimaia gazeta, 5 May, 1994.

8 This is what well-known Russian analyst V. Nikonov said in an interview with Georgian television, as well as many deputies of both chambers of the Russian Parliament in interviews with Georgian and Russian TV channels and newspapers in 2002-2003.

9 See: A. Jonathan, "The Caucasus States: the Regional Security Complex," in: *Security Dilemmas in Russia and Eurasia*, ed. by R. Allison and C. Bluth. RIIa, London, 1998, p. 176.

10 Is it not indeed a curious situation when a strong neighbor de facto occupies two territories of a sovereign, but very weak neighbor, Georgia, but the former's parliament did not want to review ratification of a framework agreement with Georgia that declared mutual recognition of territorial integrity.

11 After a new leadership came to power in Georgia, consultations were renewed regarding this agreement, but soon everyone stopped talking about it.

12 See: A. Chigorin, "Rossiisko-gruzinskie otnosheniia. Chto dal'she?" *Mezhdunarodnaia zhizn'*, No. 5, 2003, p. 52.

13 Personal interview with Archil Gegeshidze, leading expert of the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, 20 April, 2006.

14 See: D. Dokuchaev, "Vinnaiia voina zakonchitsia niche," 19.4.2006. *Miach na nashei storone*, *Politkom.ru*, 14 April, 2006; V. Socor, "Russia Bans Georgian, Moldova Wines and Other Products," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 28 March, 2006, Vol. 3, Issue 60.

15 [*Lenta.ru/news/2006/04/11*].

16 See: T. Stanovaia, "Nepriznannym respublikam pomogaet Moskva neofitsial'naia," *Politkom.ru*, 28 March, 2006; A. Kuznetsov, "Vperiod v proshloe," *Lenta.ru/26/03/23*; V. Portnikov, "Odin den' v Rossii," *Politkom.ru*, 27 March, 2006.

17 A vivid example of the disdain of the Russian authorities for international standards of conduct is the visit to Abkhazia in mid-July 2003 of the then chairman of the Russian State Duma Committee on International Affairs Dmitry Rogozin and Chairman of the Committee on Geopolitics Alexander Shabanov (see: *Mtavari gazet*i, Tbilisi, 17 July, 2003; *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 18 July, 2003). The recent participation in the celebrations of Independence Day in Sukhumi by Deputy Chairman of the Russian State Duma Sergei Baburin can be considered a typical example of such actions by the Russian side. "It is not only your, but also our, Russian holiday. Abkhazia was and remains the pride and hope of all Russia," said Baburin at a meeting (see: S. Baburin, "Abkhazia—eto geopoliticheskaia realnost'," *IA Regnum*, 30 September, 2005).

18 M. Alexandrov, "Tri elementa sderzhivaniia Gruzii," *Materik*, 1 April, 2006.

19 Ibidem.

20 Ibidem.

21 Ibidem.

22 "Kakie ryhagi vliianiia na Gruziiu est' u Rossii?" Online conference of Mikhail Alexandrov, *km.ru*, 3 April, 2006.

23 Ibidem.

24 S. Markedonov, "Chtoby ustanovit' szhimaiushcheesia vliianie Rossii na Iuzhnom Kavkaze, neobkhodimo otkazat'sia ot prodolzheniia sovetskoi politiki," *Prognosis.ru*, 28 December, 2005.